

People across our community in Portland are in mourning following the violent shooting rampage that occurred at the Clackamas Town Center Tuesday.

At least 10,000 people were working and shopping in the mall when a young man with an assault-style rifle discharged sixty or more shots. Two people were killed and a young 15-year-old girl was seriously wounded.

This country has suffered through one gun episode after another, including the horrific tragedy in Springfield, Oregon in May of 1998, where four people were killed and another 24 wounded. Still, it seems that we can't have a rational discussion in America on gun violence without unfounded claims of overreach. We have allowed the gun lobby to prevent the federal government from even researching the facts about gun violence, let alone potential solutions.

This political intimidation, combined with a lack of willpower in Congress, has made it impossible to even close the gun show loophole where individuals in many states can purchase an unlimited amount of guns without a background check. These gun interests like the NRA argue that all we need is for existing gun laws to be enforced. Then these same individuals and groups systematically set about to restrict and weaken the laws we have and underfund even the most feeble enforcement efforts. We now live in a country where too many people are armed with military-grade weapons that are designed only to kill people.

We must fight back against the false messages and fear-mongering. Having a thoughtful and rational conversation about gun safety is not an assault on our rights; rather, it is critical for public health and safety. It is time to recognize these realities and for politicians, gun owners, American businesses and the health community to come together to deal with the epidemic of gun violence the way we would treat any other threat to the safety of our families and communities.

There is a ray of hope. When nearly half of all military suicides are committed with privately owned weapons, the Pentagon and Congress are taking steps to allow commanding officers and mental health providers to encourage at-risk soldiers to surrender their privately owned

weapons. The military has a long history of requiring at-risk soldiers to surrender their military-issued firearms, but a provision in the FY11 National Defense Authorization prevents commanding officers and mental health providers from extending this common-sense approach to privately owned weapons, which is a huge obstacle to comprehensive suicide prevention. Fortunately, Congress looks poised to include language in this year's Defense Authorization restoring the ability to discuss firearms kept at home and encourage responsible action such as gun locks. These are simple steps, and if we can do this for our military families, perhaps we can have the same consideration for the rest of our families.

We will continue to mourn the tragic deaths on Tuesday and of countless past victims, but we must not sit idly by until the next tragedy. To truly honor the victims of this, and every other shooting, we must be serious about this epidemic once and for all.